

Beyond Moses to The Messiah

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The Question of Sabbaths, New Moons and Holy Days

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We have seen that Jesus' intention to fulfill the law certainly did not mean that he was simply reinforcing the laws of Moses. The Sermon on the Mount, in that case, would have been entirely unnecessary. "Fulfillment" entailed some radical changes in what it means to be obedient. Jesus is not just a copy of Moses, but he is the prophet raised up from Israel "like Moses" (Deut. 18:15-19; Acts 3:22; 7:27). It is the words of Jesus and of his emissaries, the Apostles and writers of Scripture, which form the new gold standard for New Covenant faith. The prophet Jesus, "like Moses," was to receive God's final revelation. The promise would be pointless if he was merely to repeat the words of Moses.

It is obvious that Jesus as a circumcised Jew kept the holy days prescribed by the law. He himself was commissioned to go to the lost tribes of Israel and he acted as "a Jew to the Jews." Jesus advised some to tithe on each herb (Matt. 23:23), a practice which few would follow literally today. However, Jesus himself also promised that further guidance into Truth would be given to the Church after his death (John 16:12, 13). The teaching of Jesus did not end at the cross. He continued to instruct the Church through the spirit in his absence. Jesus speaks to us in Paul and the rest of the New Testament.

The issue for us today as Gentile believers is to discover what obligation we now have to the special days given to Israel. We have seen already that circumcision in its original form has been abolished; that the law of clean and unclean is irrelevant in its literal sense. What of the Sabbath and holy days?

Colossians 2:16, 17

We should treat as of major importance Paul's only reference to the words "Sabbath" and "holy days" in the whole of his preserved writings. This occurs in Colossians 2:16. In this verse Paul describes the holy days (annual observance), new moons (monthly observance) and Sabbath (weekly observance) as a "shadow." In so doing he reveals the apostolic mind on this crucial issue.

It would seem quite amazing that if Paul felt that Sabbath-keeping was an absolute requirement for salvation he could describe the weekly Sabbath and holy days as a shadow! This could lead to dangerous misunderstanding. Nevertheless the fact is clear beyond all doubt. Paul does indeed call the Sabbath, the holy days and the new moons a shadow. A

shadow ceases to be significant when the reality, Christ, appears. Paul uses exactly the same language of shadow and reality that we find in **Hebrews 10:1** where the “shadow” sacrifices of the Old Testament are now rendered obsolete by the “body” sacrifice of Christ (**Heb. 10:10**): “The law having a shadow of the good things to come...” (Heb. 10:1).

Here the law of sacrifices was provisional and rendered unnecessary by the appearance of Christ. But Paul says exactly the same of the observance of special days in **Colossians 2:16, 17**. The law prescribing the observance of holy days, new moons and Sabbaths foreshadowed the reality of Christ and his Kingdom — the good things coming.

The point about the Sabbath being a shadow is so important (in view of the immense value attached to the Sabbath by some) that we should look again at Colossians 2:16, 17: “[Because Christ has cancelled the certificate of decrees which was against us, **v. 14**], therefore let no one act as your judge [take you to task] in regard to food and drink or in regard to a festival, new moon or a Sabbath day — things which are a shadow of what is to come, but the substance [anticipated by the shadow] belongs to Christ.”

There it is in black and white. This is the final New Testament information given about Sabbath-keeping. The significance of the Sabbath day for Christians, as well as of the holy days and new moons, is comparable to a shadow. These days no longer have any substance and will not therefore benefit those who try to observe them. (**Do Sabbath-keepers in fact keep the Sabbath properly?** Do they, for example, obey the Sabbath command by observing the rules for limited travel on Saturday? **Acts 1:12**.) What counts now is Christ and his commands. **He and his new law are the fulfillment of that shadow.** In him we should strive for a permanent “Sabbath,” every day of the week. No wonder, then, that Matthew includes Jesus’ famous saying about coming to him to find rest in the same context as a dispute over plucking ears of corn on the Sabbath (**Matt. 11:28-12:8**).

Matthew also notes that the priests working in the Temple were not bound by the Sabbath law (**Matt. 12:5**). It was not a sin for those priests to break the Sabbath. As Jesus pointed out, he and his followers represent the new spiritual temple (~~Matt. 12:4, 5~~) and he is himself the new High Priest. There is more than a hint here that Sabbath keeping is part of the old order. We may well say that the law, by exempting the priests from the Sabbath commandment when they worked in the Temple, foreshadowed the Christians’ freedom from the Sabbath law while they now carry out God’s work every day of the week. Just as the Sabbath of the Old Testament was a shadow of Christ (Col. 2:17), so were the sacrifices (Heb. 10:1). And the priests’ exemption from Sabbath observance pointed to a time when those who obey God would do so by complying with principles different from those given to Israel.

Attempts by Sabbath-keepers to retranslate Colossians 2:16, 17 are unconvincing. Some maintain that the weekly Sabbath is excluded from Paul’s “trio” of observances. Others hold that all three types of observance are meant. They then argue that Paul does not call the

days themselves a shadow but things wrongly added to the days. One Sabbath exponent thinks that the Colossians were being urged to offer sacrifices on the special days. **But could a Gentile in Colosse offer a sacrifice according to the law?** This could only be done in the Temple in Jerusalem.

A plain reading of Colossians 2:16, 17 reveals that Paul lumps together three types of special observances and pronounces them a shadow. This hardly makes Sabbathkeeping the issue for salvation as some present it.

It may be that deep down many Sabbatarians feel as one Seventh-day Adventist who renounced Sabbathkeeping after 28 years. "I have often wished that Colossians 2:16, 17 was not in the Bible, and it troubles my Seventh-day Adventist friends as much as it did me, say what they will."¹

Those who wonder about this passage should reflect on the plain words of Dean Alford in his celebrated Commentary on the Greek Testament:

"We may observe that if the ordinance of the Sabbath had been, in any form, of lasting obligation on the Christian Church it would have been quite impossible for the Apostle to have spoken thus [Col. 2:16, 17]. **The fact of an obligatory rest of one day**, whether the seventh or the first, would have been directly in the teeth of his assertion here: **the holding of such would have been still to retain the shadow, while we possess the substance**. And no answer can be given to this by the transparent special pleading, that he was speaking only of that which was Jewish in such observances: the whole argument being general and the axiom of verse 17 universally applicable."

(1) Cited by M.S. Logan, Sabbath Theology: A Reply to Those who Insist that Saturday is the Only True Sabbath, New York Sabbath Committee, 1913, p. 269.

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